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SUBJECT: Special Media Reaction: Colombo Press Conference to Announce Marine Draw-down and Continuing USG Relief Efforts

1. (U) Summary: Media coverage of post's January 29 press conference to announce plans to transition from a mix of military and civilian tsunami relief efforts to a fully civilian one was prominent and widespread, generating front-page headlines but little editorial comment. Most media focused on the imminent draw-down of military forces and whether this implied a reduction in the USG commitment to rehabilitation efforts. A few outlets played up Charge's assertion that our position on contact with the LTTE had not changed. The conference served to underscore the deep USG commitment to relief and rehabilitation programs in Sri Lanka and reassure the Sri Lankan public that despite the military draw-down, our civilian programs aimed at reconstruction will increase. End summary.

2. (U) Post held an open press conference January 29 led by Charge d'Affaires James Entwistle; Brigadier General Frank Panter, head of the Combined Support Group in Sri Lanka; Carol Becker, USAID Mission head; and Bill Berger, head of OFDA's Disaster Assistance Response Team. Approximately 15 different print and broadcast organizations, including the international wire services, attended the conference. A press release (para 6) and fact sheets handed out at the conference summarized all the activities the U.S. military and USAID had carried out to date and stressed our transition to a more long-term, civilian-led effort after the Marines had largely accomplished their mission. The following day's newspapers (January 30), for the most part, emphasized the military withdrawal rather than the continuation of civilian programs, with headlines such as the government-owned Sunday Observer's (01/29) front-page banner: "U.S. Marines leave by February 15," or the Sunday Leader's inside header: "U.S. to withdraw Marines from Lanka." The independent Sunday Island took a slightly different tack, headlining: "U.S. willing to return, but not to LTTE-held areas," as did the independent Sunday Times, titling its coverage of the press conference "Troops to go but U.S. pledge firm."

3. (U) The Tamil and Sinhalese language press likewise gave the conference wide coverage, with many outlets running front-page photographs and headlines January 30 and 31. Independent Sinhala daily Lankadeepa headlined: "American commandos leave in two weeks after concluding relief activities" and subheaded "The tsunami has not changed America's stance on the Tigers." Independent Divaina bannered: "American forces leave in the next two weeks; ready to come back if need be." Government-owned Sinhala weekender Silumina January 30 led with "American relief services will continue." Independent Tamil daily Thinakkural January 31 subheaded: "U.S. troops are engaging in relief assistance in cooperation with the Indian and Sri Lankan militaries - U.S. Embassy's Charge d'Affaires, James Entwistle." Government-owned Tamil weekender Thinakaran Vaara Manjari headlined: "American troops in Sri Lanka will leave by February 15 - Brig. Gen. Panter."

4. (U) Local television and radio also covered the story widely, leading with items from the presser in their January 30 afternoon and evening news broadcasts, and mentioning it as part of their weekly news roundups on January 30. In addition, news websites such as the independent Lanka Academic and the pro-LTTE TamilNet covered the story prominently, without editorializing.

5. (U) Comment: Working in cooperation with the Combined Support Group (CSG), post arranged widespread and continuous coverage of the U.S. military's tsunami relief efforts in Sri Lanka. Thus, it is no surprise that coverage of a press conference designed to focus on the transition to a longer-term, ongoing civilian, reconstruction effort would stress the military draw-down aspect of that transition. Nevertheless, with the CSG beginning to pack up and re-deploy its planes and ship under the media's gaze, this was an opportune time to ward off any rumors about the U.S. abandoning Sri Lanka. The statements by the Charge and USAID Mission Director emphasizing the increasing commitment of civilian resources

to reconstruction and rehabilitation allowed us to shape the story in a positive direction and allay the suspicions of some that the military had ulterior motives for coming to Sri Lanka. End Comment.

16. (U) The full text of Mission's press release, disseminated January 29, appears below.

Begin text:

U.S. GOVERNMENT TSUNAMI ASSISTANCE TO SRI LANKA
ENTERS NEW PHASE

Colombo, January 29: The U.S. Government's assistance program to Sri Lanka in the wake of the December 26 tsunami transitions today in a shift from a combined military and civil relief effort to one focused more on rehabilitation and reconstruction carried out by civilian organizations. The U.S. military has successfully completed their primary missions in Galle, Ampara and Jaffna and has begun a draw down of their personnel and equipment on the island, at the same time that U.S. civilian assistance is increasing and focusing more on long-term recovery, according to the U.S. Embassy's Chargé d'Affaires, James Entwistle.

"We're proud of the tremendous assistance rendered by the U.S. military to provide immediate relief at an important period of time following the tsunami," said Entwistle at a press conference today. "They have completed the tasks of heavy ground and air lift, debris clearing, medical assistance, and transportation of supplies and equipment for which they are best suited. Now we are transitioning to an increased focus on the civilian reconstruction and recovery effort."

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID), U.S. military forces, international relief organizations and regional militaries have worked side by side throughout this disaster to reach those affected. Since arriving in Sri Lanka, U.S. military C-130 cargo planes and HH-60 helicopters have conducted nearly 300 humanitarian assistance flights, delivering more than 600,000 pounds of relief supplies to areas around the country including Koggala, Ampara, Pottuvil, China Bay and Jaffna. United States military flights also transported hundreds of doctors, relief workers and third-country national military personnel to multiple relief distribution sites.

U.S. military medical personnel distributed medical supplies to hospitals throughout the island, and provided care for more than 1,800 patients in northern Sri Lanka.

To support the disaster relief phase, U.S. military engineers cleared unsafe debris from schools, demolished unsafe buildings, returned boats displaced by the tsunami to Galle harbor and reinforced an existing sea wall. They also distributed nearly 90,000 gallons of fresh water, and decontaminated water from fresh water wells.

In the Maldives, a detachment of about 100 U.S. Marines and Sailors worked in concert with the Maritime Prepositioning Force Ships MV Lummus and MV Bonnyman to clear debris, as well as produce, transport and distribute more than 120,000 gallons of fresh water to islands in Laamu Atoll, much of which was produced using floating reverse osmosis water purification stations. Additionally, these personnel have distributed water containers, hygiene kits, medicine and medical supplies, and water treatment supplies.

Entwistle also noted in his remarks that, "Sri Lankan government leadership has been essential to the rapid humanitarian assistance response by the large number of U.S. and international agencies and organizations. USAID and our military's Combined Support Group have been coordinating very smoothly with the government on their activities, and we want to thank the Sri Lankan government for its support of our operations."

Brigadier General Frank A. Panter, commander of Combined Support Group-Sri Lanka, stated: "I believe we have made a positive contribution, and we're honored we were able to do so. We will continue to provide support and cooperate with the government as much as we can, even as we transition to different kinds of assistance. I can honestly say that all the members of the Combined Support Group have taken great pride and satisfaction in being a part of such a worthy effort."

To date, in response to the earthquake and tsunamis in Sri Lanka, the U.S. Government has provided more than \$57.4 million in assistance. Of this amount, USAID's Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) provided more than \$32.8 million to assist with the immediate relief and recovery efforts in Sri Lanka. USAID/OFDA's implementing partners are addressing needs in affected districts in Sri Lanka and supporting activities in the areas of emergency

relief supplies, shelter, water and sanitation, health, livelihoods recovery, psychological and social support, protection, and anti-trafficking, logistics and coordination, and cleanup and rehabilitation activities to assist affected communities in Sri Lanka. USAID/OFDA's cash-for-work programs provide immediate cleanup and reconstruction support to help victims regain their livelihoods and shelter, and immediate community-focused micro-credit programs will allow affected families to rebuild their livelihoods. USAID/OFDA's transitional shelter program will build 10,000 transitional houses for those individuals most affected by the impact of the earthquake and tsunamis.

Since their inception, USAID/OFDA's programs have benefited an estimated 300,000 people in Sri Lanka. Upon completion of the relief stage, an estimated 1.5 million affected persons will benefit from USAID/OFDA's programs.
End Text.

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